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Thursday, 25 August 2011, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Hardeep Singh Puri	(India)
Members:	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Mr. Barbalić
	Brazil	Mrs. Dunlop
	China	Mr. Wang Min
	Colombia	Mr. Osorio
	France	Mr. Briens
	Gabon	Mr. Messone
	Germany	Mr. Berger
	Lebanon	Mr. Salam
	Nigeria	Mr. Onowu
	Portugal	Mr. Cabral
	Russian Federation	Mr. Zhukov
	South Africa	Mr. Laher
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Sheard
	United States of America	Mrs. DiCarlo

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: Under rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I now give the floor to Mr. Pascoe.

Mr. Pascoe: Ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and establishing an independent and viable State of Palestine, living side by side with Israel in peace and security, are long overdue. In a rapidly changing regional context, serious progress towards that goal is urgent. The deadlines that were set a year ago with respect to resolving all permanent status issues and completing the Palestinian State-building agenda are upon us. However, despite continued efforts to assist Israel and the Palestinians in finding a way back to the negotiating table, the political deadlock persists. Differences remain profound between the parties regarding what terms should frame negotiations, and mistrust is deepening.

The status quo is unsustainable and damaging to both sides. In a stark reminder of the fragility of the situation, the recent period witnessed a serious escalation of violence marked by terrorist attacks targeting several civilian vehicles and one military vehicle in southern Israel on 18 August. The coordinated attacks resulted in the death of eight Israelis, including two soldiers and six civilians. Egyptian security forces cooperated with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on their side of the border to counter the attacks. However, five Egyptian security personnel died in the operation.

Citing intelligence attributing the attacks to a Palestinian group based in Gaza, Israel conducted 45 air strikes on Gaza that killed 19 Palestinians, including three civilians. Thirty Palestinians, including at least 10 militants, were also injured. The IDF also conducted search operations in Hebron in the West Bank, reportedly arresting about 120 Hamas members and injuring 55 Palestinians. Gaza militants indiscriminately fired more than 100 rockets and projectiles into Israel, killing one Israeli civilian and injuring 27.

The Secretary-General and the Quartet strongly condemned the terror attacks. They also expressed their concern at the risk of escalation and called for restraint from all sides. The Secretariat provided an initial briefing on these developments on 19 August. On 20 August, Israel conveyed regret over the Egyptian deaths, which had heightened the tensions between the two countries.

The Office of the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process was actively engaged and supported important efforts to restore the calm out of Gaza that had prevailed since April. Special Coordinator Serry visited Cairo on 21 August to work closely with the Egyptian Government in this regard and met with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Chief of Intelligence. A fragile calm was restored earlier this week, but we remain concerned by the risk of escalation. In this context, we reiterate that the cessation of hostilities is a key element of progress towards the implementation of resolutions 1850 (2008) and 1860 (2009). The militants' indiscriminate firing of rockets towards civilian areas is unacceptable, and the Secretary-General has consistently condemned such acts. We reiterate the Secretary-General's call for all sides to act with restraint.

Preserving calm is all the more important to give ongoing diplomatic efforts aimed at resuming meaningful negotiations a chance. The Secretary-General has continued to encourage the parties to overcome their differences and to support Quartet engagement in this regard.

However, with no political breakthrough and with Israeli settlement activity continuing, the Palestinian leadership confirmed its intentions to approach the United Nations in September. On 28 July, the Palestinian Liberation Organization Executive Committee announced its support for the leadership's intention to go to the General Assembly and the Security Council. On 4 August, the Arab Peace Initiative Committee announced the Arab League's plan to call on United Nations Member States to recognize a Palestinian State within the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and to move to submit an application for full United Nations

membership. The Committee confirmed its decision at its meeting on 23 August. The Government of Israel has reiterated its opposition to Palestinian action in the United Nations. We continue to hope that the international community will be able to shape a legitimate and balanced way forward to help the parties resume meaningful negotiations that will realize the two-State solution.

We have consistently shared our assessment that the Palestinian Authority's State-building agenda has successfully laid the foundations of a Palestinian State, notably in the key areas in which the United Nations works with the Authority. Credible reforms have led to tangible economic and security improvements. Those achievements must be consolidated and bolstered by genuine political prospects for Palestinian statehood to be achieved in the course of substantive negotiations.

The Palestinian Authority also needs to have the financial means to sustain its State-building and reform agenda. Due to shortfalls in donor funding, the Palestinian Authority is experiencing a serious fiscal crisis and needs $250 million in additional commitments immediately to meet its obligations. We call on the donors to provide timely and generous support.

In a development that is a source of serious concern, the Government of Israel has announced a series of new settlement expansions in the West Bank. In total, some 5,200 units are planned in occupied East Jerusalem. Another 277 units were also approved in the West Bank settlement of Ariel — the largest number approved outside East Jerusalem in a single settlement by the current Government. The Secretary-General reiterated that settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is contrary to international law. On 16 August, the Quartet expressed great concern at these announcements and reiterated its statement of 12 March 2010, which condemned a similar announcement by the Government of Israel. The Quartet also reaffirmed that unilateral action by either party cannot prejudge the outcome of negotiations and will not be recognized by the international community.

In a more positive development, on 2 August the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the evacuation of the illegal settlement outpost of Migron, and we look forward to its implementation.

The intention of the Government of Israel to relocate some 2,300 Bedouins living in Area C is also worrying. The land where this Bedouin community lives has been allocated for the construction and expansion of the Ma'ale Adumim bloc of settlements in East Jerusalem. On 22 August, the Israeli High Court of Justice rejected an appeal to reroute a section of the barrier around the West Bank village of Al-Walajeh, thus enabling construction on a route that risks encircling the village and cutting it off from free access both from East Jerusalem and from the rest of the West Bank.

Additional tensions continue to arise from settler violence, IDF incursions and ongoing restrictions on movement and access. On 1 August, the IDF shot and killed two Palestinians during a search-and-arrest operation in the Qalandiya refugee camp. Five Israeli soldiers were injured in that operation. While violent attacks by settlers on Palestinians decreased during the reporting period, several such incidents resulted in one Palestinian child being injured and property damage, while one settler was also injured. On 2 August, the IDF issued restraining orders against 12 settlers from a village south of Nablus who were suspected of so-called price tag activities against Palestinians. The Secretary-General has consistently called for perpetrators of such incidents to be brought to justice.

As Muslims celebrate the month of Ramadan, restrictions remain on access for prayers at the Al-Aqsa mosque. The Israeli authorities initially eased access to East Jerusalem for West Bank Palestinians, allowing about 117,000 Palestinians to enter the city on the second Friday of Ramadan. But it tightened restrictions again last week. On 17 August, the Israeli authorities extended the closure of Orient House and the Chamber of Commerce in East Jerusalem pursuant to their ongoing ban on Palestinian Government institutions in the city. These actions are contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map. As the Quartet reiterated on 16 August, Jerusalem is a core issue that must be resolved through negotiations.

The living conditions of the population of the Gaza Strip remain a priority for the United Nations. Imports into Gaza have increased by 12 per cent since our last briefing. This is a step in the right direction. However, restrictions remain in place, limiting improvements in people's livelihoods, which have deteriorated over the three years of closure. To address Gaza's humanitarian needs and rebuild the foundations of its economy, a comprehensive easing of the closure

is needed, along with a substantial improvement in the security situation.

We reiterate that humanitarian activity is a mainstay of assistance for over 1 million Gazans, and it is key that humanitarian organizations be able to exercise their functions unhindered and independently. The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator has helped to defuse tensions around the closing of a medical non-governmental organization (NGO) in Gaza over its refusal to allow in-house auditing by the de facto Ministry of the Interior. We welcome the reopening of this NGO on 14 August. However we are concerned over new orders by the Gaza de facto authorities that would require staff of civil society groups to register with them to travel outside the Gaza Strip in their official functions.

The 17 August decision of the de facto Ministry of Education to prevent eight students from Gaza from travelling to the United States on scholarships is also of concern and goes contrary to the efforts of the international community to help restore normalcy in Gaza. In another disturbing event on 28 July, armed men attacked and vandalized a United Nations facility used for summer camps for children.

Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit has remained in Hamas captivity since 25 June 2006. I call on his captors to allow humanitarian access to him and to release him without further delay. Indirect talks have reportedly been held between Israel and the Gaza de facto authorities, under Egyptian auspices, towards the conclusion of a prisoner exchange deal, and we hope an agreement can soon be reached.

Fatah and Hamas representatives continue to meet on the implementation of the reconciliation accord agreed in Cairo in May. We continue to support reconciliation efforts within the framework of the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the positions of the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative.

The reconciliation accord envisages that elections will be held following the formation of a technocratic Government of unity. On 22 August, President Abbas issued a decree postponing local elections without setting a new date, stating that conditions should first be in place for the election commission to work in all of the territory. The elections had been set for 22 October.

I would like to turn to the situation in Lebanon, where a number of security incidents of concern occurred. On 26 July, a convoy of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was targeted outside the city of Saïda, injuring five peacekeepers. This was the second such attack within two months, which the Secretary-General strongly condemned. A brief exchange of fire between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Israel Defense Forces near the Wazzani River took place on 1 August. The Council was briefed on these incidents two days ago. Despite these events, the situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remained generally quiet and stable.

Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis and in high numbers. In addition, two explosions took place in Beirut on 29 July and 11 August in circumstances that remain unclear. The latter killed two persons who were reportedly handling an explosive device and injured two others. On 13 August, there was a shooting directed at the property of Member of Parliament Suleiman Franjieh.

On 5 and 6 August, heavy clashes between armed factions erupted in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp following an assassination attempt against the military commander of Fatah in Lebanon. A ceasefire was agreed upon after hours of fighting that left a number of people injured. One school of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, causing material damage to two classrooms.

Against this background, during his visit to Lebanon from 16 to 19 August, President Abbas reaffirmed his position that the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon "have no need for weapons, inside or outside the camps, because they are protected by Lebanese law". The President also inaugurated a new Palestinian embassy in Beirut, marking the upgrading of the PLO's diplomatic representation in Lebanon and his efforts to seek Lebanon's support for the recognition of a Palestinian State at the United Nations in September.

On 3 and 4 August, the Lebanese Parliament held its first session since the formation of Prime Minister Mikati's Government on 7 July. At that session, among other items, the Parliament adopted a law that defines the maritime zones under Lebanon's sovereignty.

The work of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon has continued and remains a major issue in Lebanon. On 9 August, the Lebanese authorities notified the Special Tribunal that they were unable to arrest and transfer those accused in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. On 18 August, the President of the Special Tribunal ordered the public advertisement of the indictment. The United Nations supports the important work of the Special Tribunal and expects full cooperation from the Government of Lebanon.

Allow me to turn briefly to events in Syria. I know that Mr. Fernandez-Taranco briefed the Council on 1 and 10 August. High Commissioner Pillay, Under-Secretary-General Amos and I briefed the Council on 18 August, and I tried to present a short update to the Council two days ago. The Secretary-General has repeatedly urged President Assad to immediately end violence against the Syrian people and to engage in meaningful reform. Yet while he pledged to do so, President Assad has not upheld that commitment. As the Secretary-General said earlier this week, it is troubling that he has not kept his word.

The Syrian security forces have continued to use excessive and lethal force against the popular protests, including in the provinces of Homs, Hamah, Dar'a, Idlib and Dayr Az Zawr, as well as in and around Damascus. Many civilians have been killed and injured, and large-scale arbitrary arrests have continued. The official Syrian media report that security and military personnel have also lost their lives over the past days.

In an interview on 21 August, President Assad remained silent on the violence committed against civilians, continuing to blame the violence on armed attacks against the army, police and security posts. He also outlined a timetable for the political reforms announced earlier, including parliamentary elections in February 2012 and a revision of the Constitution. However, the failure to rein in security forces undermined the credibility of such announcements, and the international community has remained quite sceptical.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has issued a deeply disturbing report on the widespread and systematic violations of human rights since March, concluding that the scale and nature of the abuse committed may amount to crimes against humanity. We welcome the decision by the Human Rights Council on Tuesday to establish an international commission of inquiry, and hope that the Syrian authorities will extend their full cooperation to the commission.

As planned, we sent a United Nations team to look at the overall humanitarian situation and to get a better understanding of the humanitarian needs of the population most affected by the violence in Syria. The team was able to visit several sites across the country, including rural Damascus, Homs, Tartus, Talkalakh, Baniyas, Latakia, Idlib, Hamah and Aleppo. It has just completed its visit today, and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs will provide a debriefing as needed, in the next few days.

Many world leaders, including those from the region, and of course the Secretary-General, have urged President Assad to immediately halt military operations that are killing his own people. He must heed the international community's appeal, and we call upon him to do so without further delay.

The President: I thank Mr. Pascoe for his briefing.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.